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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discussion of the Malaysian television phenomenon and associated implications for the country's politics, governance, and social development. As a background to the problems of television's adjustments and adaptations in Malaysia, difficulties and complexities of television in the west and other developing countries are examined. The extent to which Television Malaysia, as a national mass media organization, has been able to play a role in nation building in the post-colonial period is then studied in two parts: how the choice of a model of nation building determines the character of the organization; and how the character of the organization influences the output of the organization. In addition, Television Malaysia is discussed: (1) from the standpoint of a government organization under political control; (2) in terms of its behavior as a mass medium denied the opportunities for the free flow of ideas that lead to change and government maturity; and (3) in light of how restrictive and manipulative programming led to adverse consequences which rendered the atmosphere unconducive for democracy to grow and mature. (33 end notes, 27 references) (CGD)

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# TELEVISION AS A TOOL FOR NATION-BUILDING IN THE THIRD WORLD: A POST-COLONIAL PATTERN, USING MALAYSIA AS A CASE-STUDY

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# TELEVISION AS A TOOL FOR NATION-BUILDING IN THE THIRD WORLD: A POST-COLONIAL PATTERN, USING MALAYSIA AS A CASE-STUDY.

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## Television in the Third World

When we speak about television in the Third World, we speak, of course, of the television phenomena in recently independent, developing countries. Both these conditions have influences on the circumstances of the inception of the television service in a particular country, its growth pattern, its programme content, its functions in society and its character as a whole.

But television is a transplanted institution in Third World countries. It came from the West. Before considering the problems of its adjustments and adaptions in that context, it is useful to look back at the problems and complexities of the istitution in the western world where it originaged and developed--born and bred, as it were. Summarizing some of those concerns, Halloran (1970) says :

> Television has been criticised for producing conformity, for operating in the interests of political and economic vested interests, for maintaining the status quo, diminishing the power and habit of critical thinking, concentrating on the trivial and on the sensational, standing in the way of the development of a truly partcipatory democracy, producing a deterioration in the aesthetic taste and general cultural standards, and for nullifying hard-won social gains, particularly in education.

Studying television in America, Head (1972) also reinforces these concerns and adds to his list of "bad" television that it provides misleading models in socialization, merchandises candidates and emphasizes personalities at the expense of issues in political campaigns, manufactures pseudo-events and oversimplifies in news dissemination, teaches and encourages delinquency, encourages unnecessary emulative consumption, teaches materialism and the belief that ends justify means, stereotypes

racial groups and denigrates minority ones, induces apathy and withdrawl in individuals, displaces active, useful and constructive activities in recreation, adds costs of advertising to consumers' burden, debases, homogenizes and trivializes the fine arts, displaces and overcommercializes and discourages attendence to spectator sports.

Continuing reasearch and awareness of the complexities of the medium no doubt bring to light new problems and effects as well as influences exercized by television on society in which it operates, not to mention the society it harmonizes, leading to the description of television audience as a "global village".

If in the western world, the cradle of television, its complexities are still in the process of being researched, its benign and malign qualities still being determined, it can safely be said that in the developing world it still remains an enigma, sometimes misunderstood and misused. There its complexities have acquired even more dimensions, its effects even more complications than in the western world.

In the developing Third World countries, television has not had a chance to evolve harmoniously in the cutural habitat of the foster countries. In many cases it is an alien form rudely thrust into the landscape. As Katz and Wedell (1977) commented:

> When we speak of transfer we are referring not to the transfer of tecnology alone, but also to the transfer of socio-cultural institutions with economic and political implications, institutions ready-packaged with organizational and programme formats and even contents.

Naturally, then, there are conflicts as the medium struggles to settle and grow. whether it settles comfortably or not, it certainly grows and expands, often at the expense of other priorities. It is made part of the modernization and urbanization process, tied to the economic and industrial development.

It is in the developing countries that television is formally assigned with objectives and directions by authorities which are often governments. For example in Thailand those aims and objectives were described, by the government in 1965, as follows:

> a) to promote national policy and common interests in the areas of politics, military affairs, economics and social welfare; b) to promote the loyalty of the citizens to the country, the religion and the King; c) to promote unity and mutual cooperation of the army and its citizens; and d) to invite citizens to retort and oppose the enemy, including those doctrines which are dangerous to the security of the nation.[1]

The Iranian objectives in 1966 were described as fostering integration, the stimulation of cultural development and widespread popular participation. But in 1968 they were redesribed in connection with the Fourth National Development Plan (1968-1972), reflecting a definite planning purpose :

> The first of the goals listed is "to publicize national development affairs from their social, political and economic point of view", and "to keep the public informed of current events". Strengthening national unity and fostering culture, art, education and entertainment are lower on the list reflecting, as might be expected, the bias of planners[2].

In Egypt, the presidential decree establishes for broadcasting the following goals, among others :

> a) elevating the standards of the arts; b) strengthening national feeling and social cooperation, spreading solidarity between social groups and supporting accepted tradition; c) discussing social problems and strengthening spiritual and moral values; and d) reviving the Arabic literacy, scientific and artistic heritage[3].

The Malaysian objectives, showing a technocratic bias as in the case of Iran above, are more open about their purpose :

> a) to explain in depth and with the widest posssible coverage the policies and programmes of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public; b) to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirement of the government; c) to assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture; and D) to provide suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment[4].

It is in the developing countries, then, that television's potential and energy is claimed to be harnessed with specific objectives in mind. But often the overt noble objectives seem to be accompanied by a "hidden agenda" as suggested by J.Lent (1982) :

> There are, no doubt, hidden agendas that the ruling elites hope for in setting media policy. In some cases, the leadership claims to want to keep out negative western influences; at other times it says it wants to develop the media for national integration purposes. But in most cases, it seems keeping out negative western values had more to do with keeping the national leadership stable than anything else.

The setting up of specific aims and objectives by these developing countries for their broadcasting services, draws attention to a paradox that goes with it. Although these countries import the bulk of technical equipment and know-how as well as programme production techniques and

training methods from the West, not to mention the actual bulk of programmes for their television, the aims and objectives that they assign to their broadcasting services bear no resemblence to the way television operates in the countries from which the hardware and know-how have been imported. These aims and objectives relate to making broadcasting a propaganda instrument for the govenments, and since governments and parties that control governments become more or less indistinguishable, it becomes a propaganda tool for parties in power as well. In style, at least, this is closer to the Soviet and Communist Eastern Europe model of broadcasting, countries with which many of the developing countries, at least many of those in the Commonwealth, may find themselves at odds ideologically, rather than the western world with which they associate themselves.

Yet it is not from the Communist World that developing countries of the Third World adapted such a style. Instead it was the British colonial masters themselves who facilitated the exclusive servicing of government in power, by setting up a"colonial model" of broadcasting (as opposed to the "metropolitan model" of the BBC) for purposes of imposing their dominance and authority over their colonial subjects, and subsequently bequeathed it to the newly independent governments. True, this was before the advent of television, but in most countries television was merely an extension of radio services and the same mould was used to cast the new service.

These aims and objectives have always been justified in the name of national unity and integration. Taking India as a case, Wheen (1985) in his broad survey of the television phenomenon, states :

> Mrs. Gandhi believed that it was quite justifiable for television to project government's point of view 'because the government does not have a paper of its own'. She also thought, like many leaders in the developing countries, that state control of broadcasting was essential for the promotion of national unity. While you are going through extremely difficult phases of development, and you have a long way to go, this is the time of greatest expectations as well as the greatest disappointment. So there has to be some medium which helps to hold the people together and project the national of view".

Today almost all the countries in the developing world have accepted and acquired television. Whether governments profess to like it or not, urbanization and modernization have enticed them to bring television into

thier countries. The volume of research is growing on what television does to societies in these countries, their government, politics, culture, arts, education and life-styles, in short to the shaping and developing of their mind. But research is still inadequate to fully describe these effects and inconclusive. Awareness is high and research questions are beginning to be asked. However answers have only begun to emerge in skimpy patterns. True, answers are skimpy even in the western world, but at least the volume of research is substantial, and this cannot be said in the case of developing countries.

Television in Malaysia

Malaysia, whose television service is treated as a case-study for this paper, is a typical example of a former British colony going through its economic and social development stages since its independence in 1957. It is a country with rich natural resources of rubber, tin ore, tea and timber from which Britain and its industries benefitted enormously. But in the wind of independence that swept Asia, Britain had to leave. But as it did so, it made certain that the power and authority was transferred to an elite rule, predisposed to be loyal and friendly to Britain, so that existing economic relationship would not be harmed.

Broadcasting (then only radio) was part of that power structure built and transferred to the new government and was designed to provide the same service that it provided for the colonial government, namely to safeguard and strengthen the authority of government. There was a strongly built-in partiality towards people and parties in power. There wasn't a moment, of course, when any of the involved parties thought of trasforming a "colonial service model" to an "independence service model", or to a "metropolitan model" like the BBC, even granting that the new government was still looking to emulate Britain, following whose example it set up the institution of the monarchy and two houses of parliament in the Westminster model. But this did not happen, and Malaysia was not unique in not doing so. India, Pakistan as well as Sri Lanka, all of which obtained their freedom earlier, did not do so either.

Television Malaysia was the creation of the independent government of Malaysia in 1963, and it was moulded in exactly the same way as Radio Malaysia. Six years of

independence had not provided enough confidence or inspiration to institute a more open and liberal broadcast service. Fostering that attitude was the overhanging threat of armed Communist insurgency in the country which, althogh quelled earlier, had not been completely eliminated.

Television grew rapidly in the country, covering the urban centres and spreading to rural areas. Sets were affordable even to a substantial number of rural people and viewership rapidly grew. Today it is the foremost medium of entertainment and information in the country with 93% of the adult population of the country able to receive it.[5]

The television phenomenon in Malaysia, as elsewhere in the developing Third World countries, is a complex one. Its inception, growth and development are full of implications for the politics, governance and social development of Malaysia as a whole. Though it is not untypical of the pattern of growth and development of television generally in the developing countries, some unique points need to be noted. Being a finely balanced multiethnic society composed of Malays, Chinese and Indians, who in turn make up a multireligious society of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and polytheism, all of which have to exist in an uneasy and imposed harmony, the role and function of the television medium becomes more complex indeed. Even at a superficial level it is not difficult to see that many more pressures are at play on the operation of the medium than is often the case, and that unique responses are required to produce some kind of order and pattern.

The external pressures that influence television in developing countries, such as the market pressure that supply and control equipment, technical know-how as well as programme packages are recognized easily--although not yet in their full impact. Internal pressures such as recreational demands created by urbanization and modernization, ideological demands created by political struggles and informational demands created by the new thrust to integrate and develop the countries have also been recognized although, again, not in their full impact. Less recognized and studied are the implications it holds for multiracial living, religious harmony and the economic and cultural aspirations of underprivileged and minority groups within the country.

This paper will discuss some of those implications, placing the inception, growth and development of Television Malaysia within the political and social milieu of the country.

All those implications relate to Television Malaysia's presumed contribution, as a communication institution, to nation-building--the transformation of Malaysia from a colonial country into an independent, sovereign state. That television, along with other mass media, has a vital role to play in nation-building has been asserted in recent forums, the main ones being the Unesco sponsored conferences in Asia and Africa. We can now examine some of the concepts on nation-building that have arisen from those forums.

Nation-Building Concepts and the Role of Communication Institutions

It can be said that mass communication can be used as an important tool in the Third World to help newly independent countries attain nation-hood. However this is independent on two important factors: who owns and controls the channels of mass communication, and what their concepts are towards nation-building. It is on those concepts and objectives that the potential contribution of the media rests. In most Third World countries, the owners and controllers of the channels of communication happen to be governments and it is their concepts of nation-building that determines the behaviour of the media.

Let us examine, first of all, some of the more restricted concepts of nation-building as perceived principally by governments. In a meeting of Unesco expert on the dynamics of nation-building in Malaysia in 1979, participants provided examples of what government understanding might be with regard to nation-building.[6]

One example provided was that some governments conceptualize the problem of nation-building principally in terms of state-formation rather than national integration--in terms more of a creation of a bureaucracy, the military, or a technocracy--rather than in terms of a conscious effort to cultivate civil liberties through popular participation in various levels of the emerging polity.

It was pointed out in the same meeting too, that the exact opposite may take place, i.e. we may have a situation in which those who run the government become too conscious about the need for national integration to a point where they assume that if they place race and ethnic relations on the agenda of their concerns, or it they do research on them, the problem will invite easier resolution.

Both cases have implications for the media. It was argued in the same meeting that a rigid attitude to existing cultural and ethnic diversity, as in the first example, may give rise to much unreflective communication which may fan primordial sentiments. In the second case, the media may become the conduit for high-visibility national integration campaigns launched by the authorities to regulate race and ethnic relations, rather than to reconstitute them in such a manner that such communal affinities do not overshadow the daily living.

The restrictive concept of nation-building--that of state-formation--often gets railroaded by governments in the name of national unity which is considered a precondition to national economic development, creating in its path cultural and social casualties from the minority groups.

Other concepts of nation-building are more broad and farsighted and they are held principally by social critics. In the same meeting referred to above, one speaker saw nation-building as involving a redefinition of sub-national identities and the emergence of a larger unity.[7] In the process smaller identities could be preserved. But it was necessary to establish their linkages with society at large, to emphasize their inter-dependence. The purpose of communication was to raise consciousness, achieve mobilization, and ensure partipation of the masses as a way to the building of a nation of liberated people controlling their own destiny.

Others viewed the term "nation-building" as referring not merely to national integration but also, and more importantly, to a vision of a truly autonomous and democratic society. Nation-building, they believed, should not mean just a working out of an arrangement of accommodation and co-existence among ethnic groups--it should involve a welding together of a human community based on universal human values.[8]

The deputy minister for Information of Malaysia, opening the meeting also stressed that any nation-building endeavour had to invest in man, ensure his fuller participation in the life of the nation as a well-rounded personality.[9]

An Unesco sposored intergovernmental conference on communication policies, hosted by Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur in 1979, produced what was called the "Kuala Lumpur Declaration" which affirmed the role of communication in nation-building in the following terms:

> The mass media of the developing countries bear a responsibility for contributing to the common task of nation-building and to the further development of the cultural identity of peoples and ethnic minorities, so ensuring national cohesion and creating abilities to derive the utmost benefit from enriching influences coming from outside .

Elsewhere the document also declared:

> We therefore call for participation of people and individuals in the communication process and for more freedom and autonomy for and the assumption of greater social responsibility by mass information media and at the same time for greater individual responsibility by and protection of those who run the media and prepare messages for circulation[10] .

Of the several recommendations passed by the same conference, two are of particular relevance to the contribution of communication to nation-building. Recommendation number 4, touching on the problem of multi-ethnicity of many countries in Asia and Oceania, and expressing recognition of the problem of promoting national integration and national unity in multiracial, multicultural, multireligious and multilingual nations, recommended that :

> governments of such multiethnic countries employ communication as an important tool in achieving national integration and to fully exploit its potential on the basis of :
>
> a) Learning what values and felt needs are shared by particular cultures at a particular time;
>
> b) Seeking to explain the various ethnic cultures to all, so as to promote a deeper understanding amongst all the people about each other;
>
> c) Seeking to obtain the mutual enrichment of the various cultures in creative and imaginative ways;
>
> d) Seeking to counteract such external cultural influences which stand in the way of endogenous cultural development or which may be harmful to the stability and socio-cultural integrity of their nations; and
>
> e) Seeking to develop a national culture based on similarities common values and norms[11] .

Recommendation number 46, on media freedom and objectivity, stated :

> Considering that freedom, responsibility and objectivity of media is an indispensible prerequisite to the expression of national aspiration, and
>
> Recognizing the desirabilty of there being a parellel involvement of media and the government for supporting the tasks of national development,
>
> Recommends to the member states of the region of Asia and Oceania to promote conditions for the media to play a role

> that is critical as well as constructive, as occasion demands vis-a-vis the government with a view to realizing the tasks of national development.[12]

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration as well as the recommendations, for which Malaysia naturally was a signatory as a member country and participant, urged a constructive liberalism to which the country was actually becoming more distant, at least as far as its treatment of television policies was concerned. This will be dealt with in more detail later in the paper. But for now it is sufficient to say that there are numerous instances in the history of conceptualization, inception and development of the organization of TV Malaysia which would point that the government actually moved in the opposite direction to the spirit of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration and the Unesco recommendations.

## Television Malaysia as a Government Department

In discussing Television Malaysia as a medium of mass communication, with all the responsibilities and power attributed to the medium, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are discussing here what is basically a government department. The behaviour of such an institution in itself presents a whole set of problems which has to be investigated.

When a government department, serving, supposedly, a neutral role in carrying out governemnt policies made out by its political masters, is also expected to play a media role, especially an adversary role as characterized by western media concepts, the conflicts that arise are serious ones indeed. But these conflicts, to be properly understood and appreciated, are best studied by employing the concepts of organizational theories in public adminitration. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into those areas in any depth, an attempt will be made to state those conflicts in general terms. This is because bureaucratic control of television does influence all other aspects of its operation and effects on the audience, and becomes a central issue in the study of Third World broadcasting.

Organizational theories suggest that the civil service is 'neutral'. But this does not mean that it is powerless. Pitt and Smith (1981), writing about govenment departments in Britain, suggest that although the constitutional role assigned by the laws and conventions to civil servants should be non-political, that officials in government departments serve their ministers with loyalty and neutrality, regardless of the minister's

party, these officials do proffer advice from positions of authority based on professional knowledge and experience. They thus help in giving advice on public policy options and do play a role in policy making.

But in a developing country where there is no convention of vigorous proffering of advice from the civil service to ministers, particularly to those from ruling parties enjoying absolute majority in parliament and, as in the case Malaysia, monopoly of government since independence, the civil service may become docile and subservient; indeed, it is more likely that it becomes bent on, and over-zealous, in carrying out the orders and please the masters.

More to the point are the two criticisms aimed at such a bureaucratic organization (Pitt and Smith, 1981). The first states that it is particularly unsuited to conditions of change. The second suggests that it is prone to rule-following to the detriment of long-run considerations. The views suggest that bureaucaratic organizations become hidebound by precedent and staffed by individuals whose behaviour is resistant to change.

Admittedly there have been very few studies on broadcasting institutions that investigate them from the government department angle. But studies that are available seem to suggest that operating the broadcasting medium as a government department constricts it from achieving its full potential as a contributor to national development.

Masani (1976), in her broad survey of broadcasting in India, suggests that government control over broadcasting is indeed restrictive and, inspite of sincerity in declared development goals, fails to achieve them satisfactorily. She found that "the conditions of work in a government department do not encourage talent by providing opportunities to young people with initiative and creative ideas; they tend to foster those who are cautious, correct and conformist".

She also refers to the situation where political control over such institutions reach authoritarian proportions :

> The pity is that from the start of broadcasting it has been assumed that no one needs to study broadcasting and that every minister, secretarty and junior official in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting knows as much about programme planning and administration as anyone in All India Radio... The degree of control exercised by the ministry and the extent of its interference may vary somewhat with different ministers and directors-general, but the right of the ministry to control a technical and creative activity like broadcasting and to interfere with the work of the professional broadcasters is unquestionable.

Frank Okwu Ugboajah (1985), studying Nigerian broadcasting, (although from a somewhat different perspective to this paper) found that it expressed and responded to government economic philosophies well, rather better than Nigerian private press. But its committment to government oriented development inhibited it from vigourously discussing matters of social controversy. "When volatile issues of development are being analyzed in Nigeria, the reseachers should look into the performance of Nigerian newspapers," he concluded.

Studies relating to Malaysian broadcasting are rare. Those studying its dynamics as an institution are rarer still. Grenfell (1979) studied the audiences available for all mass media in Malaysia and suggested that such a study was a starting point for attempts to evaluate mass media roles in developing countries.

Leslie Sargent (1976) studying communications structure in Malaysia provided a useful survey of the state of the arts of media in Malaysia. In his review of a number of studies done at Universiti Sains Malaysia he found that :

> It would appear that substantial proportions of government information were undermined by lack of confidence, either in the media or in the government sources of information. If, as indicated in the studies reported, somewhere between 30 percent and 50 percent of readers/listeners discount government information as unreliable, this suggests that (funds) are being inefficiently used.

He further concluded that "a government which itself controls the communication media automatically forfeits the validation of impartial reporting. On balance, this may be desirable or even necessary in order to avoid disruption, but it can be costly in terms of the trust people put in the information received."

While these studies look at what is happening at the receiver end, they hardly shed any light on what happens at the production end. Lowe, in two enlightening studies, provided material closer to the theme of this thesis. The first was "Development Broadcasting: Policy Implementation and Programming in the Development and Agricultural Section of Radio and Television Malaysia" (1980) and the second, "TV Programme Management in a Plural Society" (with Jaafar Kamin,1982).

In the former (Lowe, 1980) he studied the policy environment that prevailed in implementing programme strategies in the Development and Agricultural Section and found :

> In the implementation of these policies and goals, Radio Television Malaysia's response has been mainly administrative, resulting in a plethora of controls, censorship, script vetting and incessant previews of pilots and actual programmes. Production staff were issued with directives of do's and dont's. In the ensuing years since 1969, the collective wisdom of the department's production staff has consisted of an informal inventory of decision rules. These have no official or written existence and they are not known as "rules". They are rules that we have inferred from the remembered collection of examples of prohibitions arising from the department's self-censorship exercises. Together these form the sum total of the organization's knowledge of what is acceptable for transmission.

Lowe drew the conclusion that there existed a gap between the promise and fulfilment of Radio and Television Malaysia in the Development and agricultural services. He showed that the actual pace of the country's development outstripped the facilities and quality of the broadcasting organization; that the organizational rigidities constrained its performance; and that communication planners and development planners failed to integrate their activities.

In the latter study (Lowe and Kamin, 1982) the same theme was expanded to cover the entire decision-making process of the management and the role played by political, religious, racial and even feudal influences on them. They concluded :

> Most of the decisions on local media content came from sources outside of the professional structure of the department. The main influence of these decisions are therefore external and they emanate from the delicate political position of the country resulting in delicate racial balances as shown by compromises and different emphasis of questions religion, language and culture.

## Nation-Building and Newly Independent Nations

The newly independent nations of the Third World can pursue their nation-building objectives in several ways. These mainly depend on how they perceive their priorities at any given moment in their history. For most countries "development" means primarily economic development , i.e. increase in agricultural and manufacturing output, raising the levels of income, improving infrastructure etc. As these are seen as a prerequisite for better living, they are pursued with vigour by building a strong

bureaucracy, increasing the professionalization of its members and creating a technocracy. Apparently there is massive intervention by governments by planning the economy with the help of technocrats and seeking to direct the private sector towards set goals.

When such policies are being pursued, the governments seek to persuade the communication institutions to go along with them, not only asking the media not to create questions and controversies so as not to distract from government objectives, but also to actively support them. These policies have found support among social scientists. Pye (1963) touching on the role of communication policies in development programmes, in countries which were in different stages of growth, said they needed somewhat different policies :

> Some countries are at the stage of very early transition, and all instruments of communication must be directed to giving support to the legitimacy of the government and to the administrative structures of states which will in time be necessary for guiding further social changes. In these countries with a small modernized elite the weight of communication policies should be on the side of protecting the freedom of these leaders and strengthening their influences throughout society.
> ... At this phase the communications media must be used to reinforce an essentially tutelage process; the time is ripe for broad appeals and for the repetition of thesis basic to civic education.

Pye qualified this support, of course, with the hope and understanding that at later stages adjustments would be made, so that differnt emerging interests would be accommodated and the wider population would be provided with opportunities to express their views to the elite. "Clearly the communication policies appropriate at one stage of development may be either irrelevant or, more likely, directly damaging if applied at other stages."

An inherent danger in communication media providing unquestioning support and strength to govenments in the early period of national development, or state-formation, is that such an attitude might be frozen and may not evolve into the later stages of liberal and more horizontal communication between the rulers and the ruled, as is hoped by the social critics. As Lerner's 'illuminating' example showed, governments,when they become frustrated by the task of converting an inert or unwilling people into their way of thinking, may conclude as Major Salem of Egypt did : "Personally I am convinced that the public was wrong."[13]

Taking the particular case of broadcasting, which tends to be appropriated by governments in the name of using it for national integration and national development, the initial attitude of providing the government with unquestioning support becomes normative and persists even into an advanced stage in democracy as was evidenced in many Third World countries including India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Their ownership tends to remain a firm monopoly of the government.

When this happens, especially when it is carried over from a colonial administration without a break, it tends to have a sense of loyalty of slavish proportions. Altaf Gauhar (1983) reviewing the decay of political institutions in Pakistan, wrote that the civil and armed services developed two strong traditions from the British: (a) a strong sense of duty and (b) an irrisistable will to obey government orders.

> Duty and discipline were guiding principles. It was enough to tell an official to do his duty, and should he pause to ask 'duty to whom?' he was asking for trouble. That one could have duty to one's country or one's conscience, which might come into conflict to one's duty to British Government, was a possibility never entertained. Duty was to the office, and office meant government. Obedience was a matter of reflex action, not a question of judgement.[14]

These traditions were meticulously preserved by governments of many newly independent nations to their own advantage. These were the traditions employed to run the civil service and, ipso facto, the broadcasting services. In the long run, and eventually, such a tradition is injurious and constricts the growth of a democratic society.

It should also be remembered that many of the privately owned newspapers played an important part, and were sometimes in the forefront, in the struggle for independence while broadcasting was still serving the colonial masters. Ironically both seem to play the same roles even after the attainment of independence, only this time against and for an indigenous ruling group. In an independent country this state of affairs invites comparison between the two forms of the media casusing considerable loss of credibility and respectability for the broadcast media in the public mind.

Frank Campbell (1982) wtiting out of his own working experience in the Guyanese government saw full justification in the utilization of nationally owned media for the support of the goverments initiated

development plans. In 1974, the Guyanese Prime Minister (later President), Forbes Burnham, said that "the government has the right to own sections of the media and the government has the right, as the final arbiter of things national, to formulate a policy so the media can play a much more important part than it has played in the past in mobilizing the people of the country for the development of the country.[15]

Campbell, agreeing with the sentiments of the Prime Minister, however, saw that in approaching these policies of development, the Guyana government applied a "pathologically narrow interpretation and implementation" to development journalism. He added :

> By a narrow implementation of government-supporting, development-oriented media policy, I refer, inter alia, to the withholding or distortion of the truth; and apparent fear that the criticism of inefficiency in even a single government agency would cause the agency, if not the entire government, to crumble; and an exclusion of the opposition voice from the media, especially the print media.[16]

Thus we find that the confidence to ease controls so that the media, especially those owned by governments, can display a more liberal attitude, particularly to include criticism of government, does not come easily to Third World governments.

There is no doubt that holding part of the media tightly in their grip serve some governments a certain short-term purpose. It was pointed out at the Unesco experts meeting on dynamics of nation-building in Kuala Lumpur, referred to earlier, that when economic crises grip the 'new states', the ruling elite may fall back upon communal loyalties to reamin in power despite the failure of their leadership and the challenge to their legitimacy and may exploit media towards that end.[17]

Under the ownership and control of governemnts, media can also be easily exploited during political cries to support and bolster ruling powers. This was the case during the Malaysian emergency following the 1969 racial riots. There are also other examples. A research design brought out by a group of participating researchers on the dynamics of nation-building in 1980, following the Unesco experts meeting referred to earlier, identified several examples worthy of study. They included constitutional crisis of Fiji in 1977, the Panchayat or multi-party system question in Nepal in 1980, the first-quarter storm of the Philippines in the 70's and the October revolts of Thailand in 1973 and 1976.[18]

## Television Malaysia and Nation-Building

With the foregoing as our background we can now take a closer look at the extent to which TV Malaysia, as a national mass media organization, has been able to play a role in nation-building in the post-colonial period. It is proposed to study this in two two broad aspects :

i) how the choice of a model of nation-building determines the character of the organization, and
ii) how the character of the organization influences the output of the organization.

### i) The Character of the Organization

Right from its inception in 1963, TV Malaysia was constituted as a government organization--in fact, a full-fledged government department--run on the same general orders under which other government departments were run. A committee of government officials appointed by the Prime Minister in 1960 recommended the introduction of the television service along the same lines as the radio services. No other body outside the government was consulted. Parliament was not asked for authority or advice in establishing the service, and the scheme was simply announced as a fait accompli.

The government engaged consultants from Canada under the Colombo Plan and they offered advice only on the technical and practical matters in implementing the service and never concerned themselves with questions of policies on control of the medium and its operations. They assumed, perhaps correctly, that it was not their place to question the wisdom of the proposed system. But it is worth observing that they cooperated to bring about a system that was monopolistic, completely governemnt controlled, and with limited or no access for views outside government approval, although they themselves came from a system that would not have tolerated such a state of affairs.[19]

The answer for their failure to do so was perhaps found in the then prevalent attitude among some development scientists that a developing country at early stages needed the support of its media and that freedom of the leaders needed protection and their influence in society needed strengthening (Pye, 1963). Even if it were so, casting the television service into a full government department was tantamount to appropriating the principal mass medium of the country for the exclusive service of a segment of a democratic society. It was being cast so concretely that

liberalization even at a gradual pace for later changes was rendered impossible.

The fact that civil servants were put in charge of all aspects of programming brought its own problems. First, as we have seen earlier, a bureaucratic organization is particularly unsuited to conditions of change. Second, that it is prone to rule-following to the detriment of long-run considerations (Pitt and Smith, 1981). Third, that it does not encourage talent for people with initiative and tends to foster those who are cautious, correct and conformist. Fourth, it is easily suceptible to control and interference by political masters (Masani, 1976).

The political control was firmly entrenched from the beginning. Throughout its life TV Malaysia served and propagated policies of the ruling government, never allowing any other view to be expressed in its broadcasts.

As civil servants TV Malaysia staff lived in fear of offending their own bosses as well as any section of the audience that the government wished not to offend. Such attitudes reduced all programme material to the least objectionable level, thus making them conformist, reverential to tradition and authority. One example was the production of a Malay drama, entitled "Awang Ku Sayang" (Awang, My Dear) in 1965, which was found to be offensive to Malay university students and was quickly amended at the instruction of the minister.[20]

That a bureaucratic system does not encourage people with initiative was also demonstrated in 1977 at the instance where a public affairs programme, "Panorama", which brought to discussion inefficiencies in government departments, was taken off the air abruptly.[21] Although the programme was well balanced by explanations by officials for criticisms aimed at them by the public, government felt too sensitive at the unfamiliar washing of their dirty linen in a government medium.

The depressing effect that this abrupt stopping of the programme, which had won wide public support and praise from the print media, on young and idealistic producers in the organization must have been significant. This was also testimony to the many fresh ideas that must have been killed off before they had had a chance to see expression on the air.

During every general election Television Malaysian was fully deployed for the purposes of helping to retain the incumbent government in power. Protests in parliament by opposition members were simply shrugged off.

But in 1969, the practice was so blatant to be so counter-productive that a government review committee itself was compelled to point out that :

> The programmes offered by TV Malaysia during the last two weeks of the election compaign, for example, had given an over-exposure of very direct propaganda...thus giving rise to adverse reactions from the urban people....[22]

But, ironically, the conclusions of the same committee were that "the government media....had not been utilized to the fullest possible extent with regard to the propagation of the masses, of government policies aims and objectives, and the rationale behind such matters." As such its recommendations were that of tightening up controls, increasing the role of decision-making at the Ministry's headquarters level and thus lessening the powers of heads of departments.[23]

A consequence of such a government stranglehold on the medium was an erosion--in fact, an almost total disapperance--of trust that the intelligentsia could place on the organization. A survey of critical opinion among a section of critical observers of Television Malaysia[24] showed that when questioned about the fairness with which TV Malaysia was serving the interests of the various levels of society in Malaysia, the vast majority of the respondents felt that it was not doing so with fairness. Respondents were asked if TV Malaysia served the interests of the various races, economic classes and the political groups fairly and a summary of their responses was as follows :

| | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|
| Races | 4% | 96% |
| Economic classes | 4% | 96% |
| Political groups | 2% | 98% |

Under race the majority felt that it served only the Malays; under economic class it served only the middle and upper income groups; in political groups it served only the ruling party groups.

Gaining access to TV Malaysia to air a certain point of view, other than support to the government's position was also an impossibility. Only 27% of all respondents felt that such an access was available to them while 60% felt they could not get access. Even such limited access was restricted to messages such as appeals for charities and publicity for a gathering or meeting of groups of a non-political kind.

The cost in terms of critical opinion held by the critical observers of the country, was heavy as shown by the survey of critical opinion. 96% of the people surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with the ownership and control of TV Malaysia, stating, among other reasons, that it was bad for the growth of democracy, hid the truth from the people, and discouraged free thinking. When offered a choice of systems nobody preferred a wholly government owned and operated system, the majority (60%) preferring a government channel along with private channels.

Thus we see that the way in which an organization is constituted, namely as a government department under political control, influences its behaviour as a mass medium. We see that it constricts freedom of expression, makes it prejudiced in favour of ruling powers and sycophantic to it. In being so it keeps away all criticism against the government and denies opportunities for the free flow of ideas that lead to change and maturity of the country.

ii) The Output of the Organization

Throughout its history, TV Malaysia was able to produce only about half of its output of programmes on its own, depending on imported programmes for the rest. In fact the proportion of imported programmes had been, except for the initial few weeks of its existence, consistently higher. An analysis of the programme content-for a regular week at five-year intervals showed the following figures.[25]

| | % of local programmes | % of imported programmes |
|---|---|---|
| 1963 (initial weeks) | 48.8 | 48.1 |
| 1969 | 37.9 | 55.0 |
| 1974 | 42.1 | 45.6 |
| 1979 | 38.4 | 49.1 |
| 1984 | 41.9 | 48.2 |

(The rest, making up the 100% in each anaylsis, consisted of station breaks, advertising and other announcements)

a) Foreign Programmes

The bulk of the foreign programmes came from the United States and other western countries such as Great Britain and Canada. A small proportion came from Australia, Japan and middle eastern countries. All these imported programmes could be classified as entertainment except those from the Middle East which were principally chosen for their Islamic religious content.

The presence of the large amount of foreign programmes in Malaysian television broadcasts was not something that the organization was happy about. Although it had been helpful in selling TV sets and drawing more audience, it lent the organization into continual criticisms by the elite and placed the TV executives in a position where they had to continually express their dislike for foreign programmes, but had to defend and justify them nevertheless.

Soon after television was launched in Malaysia, there was a demand to expand the hours of broadcast as well as the area of transmission coverage. Filling those hours with meaningful and interesting local programmes was beyond the capacity of the production staff, whose numbers, resources and training could not match the demand. On the otherhand, imported programmes from the West were cheap, readily available and attractive. It was as if the TV set was created for the mass produced, syndicated films market, and the audience, particularly the urban ones, the largest groups to posses the sets, seemed to hunger for it more and more. In short popularizing the TV service depended upon using more and more imported programmes, and that was the course taken by the organization.

But the choice was made carefully. Only those programmes that were deemed to be entertaining were chosen. Among documentaries only those of a pragmatic nature of education were chosen. Ideological programmes of all kinds were kept away. In any case the preference was for the bulk of entertainment programmes from Hollywood--the detective thrillers, cartoons and soap opera--for these were the time-fillers.

But the organization was not unconscious of the values with which even the entertainment programmes were laden. These programmes were censored and frequently edited for scenes of a sexual nature, including kissing, unruly or violent behaviour etc. Many programmes were rejected outright too. On the whole they were sanitized as much as possible before they were allowed on the screen.

But it was not possible to keep the influences away altogether. The western concepts of sex and physical intimacy had become so liberalized and pervaded entire programmes that scratching them off altogether was impossible. The concepts remained intertwined with dialogue and action essential to the story line that editing them off would have made the programmes incomprehensible.

Thus, in spite of criticism by the elite and promises by government ministers that foreign programmes would be reduced to at least 40% of the airtime, which remained a target on paper throughout TV Malaysia's history, foreign programmes continued to dominate the airtime of TV Malaysia.

In this regard, even the government of the most authoritarian period of of the 1969 emergency proved to be helpless. The Minister during this period, Ghazalie Shafie, admitted to parliament that there was an excess of foreign films--" many of them tasteless"-- on TV Malaysia, and that he had contractual obligations to show them.[26]

In a political and ideological context, local civic and religious organizations attempted to get TV Malaysia to ban American programmes in protest to America's support for Zionism. Although the government was officially in sympathy with the cause, again TV Malaysia was not able to ban or even reduce the number of programmes being shown citing "contractual obligations".[27]

On the other hand, if government ever showed signs of reducing the foreign, particularly American, imports, urban recreational interests spoke up vehementally, and were supported by the free press, as evidenced during the period of 1976-1979. The organization was then urged not to expect its people "to look inward and backward all the time; looking outward is just as important. It helps remove any frog-in the-well mentality and tends to make people more tolerant".[28]

Thus the hold of the foreign imported programmes proved to be far stronger than government pretended it to be, as a "time-filler" -for instance, as it was frequently described, and government remained quite helpless in reducing it.

The effect that this had had on the viewership remained uncertain. In the survey of critical opinion it was shown that 71% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the foreign entertainment shown on TV Malaysia while 29% were dissatisfied. But the satisfaction rate did not seem to have anything to do with the values intrinsic in these programmes. It seemed to stem from the belief that the audiences were discriminating enough and its grounding in its own culture and education would prevent it from being influenced, and that the audience would view the programmes and accept them only as entertainment and no more than that. If they learned anything at all, it would be the good things ostensibly

intended in the programmes. But nevertheless, some critics maintained that there was an emphasis in these programmes on consumerism, materialism, violence and sex, the sheer viewing of which in itself was a pollution of the mind of the audience.

More significantly, the organization was criticized for its emphasis on selecting these programmes. The fact that the bulk of the selection was entertainment pporgrammes rather than documentaries of an educational sort, showed that the organization was aiming for popularity rather than edification. In this sense it can be argued that television was being used to create a narcotic effect on the population instead of being used to raise its level of thinking and intelligence.

b) Local Programmes

If the organization seemed quite helpless in controlling the amount and content of foreign imported programmes, and partially resigned to whatever effect they might have on the audience, this was not the case with local programmes whose direction and contents were entirely under its control. At its inception and during its formative years of 1963 to 1969, TV Malaysia did not have any specific declared objectives, other than the broad and universal ones of information, education and entertainment. However, all these three aspects were carefully vetted and directed to ensure that they conform to the government's wishes. During those years there was almost a casual air of about running the television service. Tunku Abdul Rahman, the former Prime Minister and founder of television in Malaysia, viewed it principally as an entertainment medium and wished to see more sports--including horse racing--in it. In local porgrammes Bahasa Malaysia, the national language, was given a prominent place, but Chinese and Tamil programmes were interspersed in the same channel, generally creating a feeling of acceptance (although, vernacular audiences remained dissatisfied).

However as an after effect of the 1969 racial disturbances, at which the government felt a loss of confidence and authority, the government moved to tighten all controls on national affairs. A committee was set up to reorganize and "strengthen" the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and that committee felt that "the existing paraphernelia of government mass media...had nevertheless not been used to the best possible advantage."[29]

With that government moved to tighten up all bureaucratic controls on the organization and established specific objectives for the department, the two most important of which were :

a) to explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage the policies and programmes of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public, and

b) to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirement of government.

Those having been established, every aspect of local programming was made to serve those objectives. News became a list of ministerial pronouncements and achievements. Opposition views were totally blacked out. Current affairs programmes were placed under a newly created Public Affairs Division whose head was a politician, close to UMNO and whose responsibility was directly to the minister, and overrode the powers of the director-general.

In the face of criticism of all these, the attitude of the government hardened considerably and the exploitation was entirely legitimized. A minister, answering questions in parliament said :

> Allow me to remind the honourable member that radio and television are government instruments, and whether other parties can or cannot participate in discussion programmes depends on the government in considering the situation and subject under discussion.[30]

Local news and current affairs programmes thus became politicized and remained biased not only to government, but by a process of extension, to the ruling party. Again, although the ruling party was an alliance of three ethnic parties (later expanded to embrace a number of other parties as Barisan Nasional), the medium served only the centre of that alliance, namely UMNO, the Malay party. Even government ministers of the component parties, if they held views other than the UMNO one on national affairs, were not allowed to express them on television. Thus it was obvious that TV Malaysia had become the voice of a particular segment of Malaysian society, the dominant and ruling elitist one, to the exclusion of all others.

Towards this end all vestiges of ethnic minority programmes of Chinese and Indian languages were eliminated from channel one, which was made the prime channel, and were confined to channel two. There their position was frozen and their growth regressed. An analysis of programme content at five year intervals showed the following statistics:

Locally produced Chinese and Tamil programmes as a percentage of all locally produced programmes:

| | Chinese | Tamil |
|---|---|---|
| 1963 (initial weeks) | 14.8 | 3.0 |
| 1974 | 4.1 | 4.0 |
| 1979 | 2.5 | 2.2 |
| 1984 | 2.4 | 2.2 |

It is clear that there was intentional neglect of ethnic minority programmes in the way they were allowed to languish in spite of protests from the respective communities. It was significant that even this limited amount of programming in vernacular languages consisted of news and current affairs programmes, serving as government propaganda, and not cultural programmes. Ethnic cultural programmes, in the form of singing and dancing by local talents constituted a very insignificant portion of predominantly Malay programmes. Thus, clearly, if Chinese and Tamil languages were reatined at all in TV Malaysia, it was only to use them for government propaganda purposes, not to promote any form of ethnic culture or language per se.

TV Malaysia also took an astringent view of religion other than Islam. All vestiges of non-Islamic religions were removed while Islam was promoted with vigour. Islam was also seen as a pervasive element in programming and all programmes came to be closely scrutinized to see that they did not deviate from Islamic beliefs. Non-Islamic religious elements, such as the showing of idols, other symbols and worship were censored. In local dramas Islamic ideology became a central theme and a controlling element.

It is apparent that such programming, serving only sections of society although it was called national, was divisive and created aversion among a substantial section of the multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious audience. It was not surprising that in our survey of critical opinion some expressed the view that in spite of all the shortcomings attributed to imported foreign programmes, they were the ones that united the TV audience, while local programmes, in effect, divided them into segments.

Almost all aspects of local programming proved to be highly unsatisfactory to the respondents in our survey of critical opinion on

TV Malaysia. A summary of their feelings can be tabulated as follows :

Percentage of respondent satisfied and dissatisfied with local programmes by programme category:

| Programme category | % satisfied | % dissatisfied |
|---|---|---|
| Local entertainment | 25 | 75 |
| Local news | 15 | 85 |
| Current affairs | 0 | 100 |
| Topical matters in current affairs: | | |
| Ruling political parties | 35 | 65 |
| Opposition political parties | 0 | 100 |
| Government affairs | 50 | 50 |
| Human rights & civil liberties | 0 | 100 |
| Minority races | 4 | 96 |
| Women's rights | 21 | 79 |
| Youth | 50 | 50 |
| Trade Unions | 0 | 100 |
| Rural Development | 54 | 46 |
| Consumer rights | 10 | 90 |
| Business and industry | 4 | 96 |
| Arts and culture | 25 | 75 |
| Religion | 25 | 75 |

Some of the consequences of this kind of restrictive and manipulative programming were that the government achievements were glorified and failures white-washed, there was no room for opposition to argue out its point of view, no opportunity for the citizens to make their own judgement on, or participate in discussions of, national issues, and consequently the atmosphere for democracy to grow and mature was rendered unconducive.

## Implications of Government Control on Programming Policies to Nation-Building

In the beginning of this paper we examined some of the prevalent concepts of nation-building, both the restricted view of state-formation

as held by many governments of newly independent nations, with their attempts to build and strengthen bureaucratic institutions, and the broader view of building of democratic societies, as held by social critics, preserving diversity and encouraging a larger unity with universal human values.

The priority for newly emergent governments, at least those modelled after the parliament and parties of Westminster, remain economic and social development as seen through the ruling party's eyes and the eyes of the voting majority that put the party in power. They develop institutions as infrastructure to galvanize the party in power. Social justice, beyond party and party supporters' interests, is a largesse they cannot afford. At best they can only justify what they do for party and electoral benefits as part of a larger social justice scheme which they envisage, but which will take time to see implemented. But time for those governments is available only in five-year or four-year chunks, i.e. between general elections, hardly enough to plan and execute a satisfactory order of social justice. So some of them won't even attempt it beyond their rhetorics. All they aim to do is to satisfy a large enough segment of society that will vote them in at the next election. It may involve a measure of social justice, but this is neither imperative nor a high priority.

One may be given to wondering, what, with such a high degree of dissatisfaction among its intelligentsia, is that such mass media organizations are aiming to achieve for the government, their master. We can only hypothesize that by providing volumnious and repetitive propagandistic information, the organizations wish to convince the bulk of their audience--ignoring the disgruntled elite minority--of the government's choices of actions in national affairs.

What these organizations contribute to nation-building, then, is the strengthening of the ruling powers, their ideologies and their protagonists, thus encouraging the growth of a rigid and authoritarian style of bureaucracy, promoting segments of the nation's social composition at the expense of the growth of other segments. The ignored segments of society belong not only to minority races, but also to minority religions and language groups, as well as the disadvantaged minority classes. Through broadcasting, these groups could participate in the nation-building process, and enjoy its fruits, only in a marginal sense if at all.

By the same token all the other broader definitions of nation-building are tended to be denied by the organizations. There is no attempt to develop "a larger unity by preserving smaller identities and emphasizing their interdependence". There is no attempt to "raise consciousness, achieve mobilization and ensure participation of the masses as a way to the building of a nation of liberated peoples...."[31] Neither is there a far-sighted attempt that nation-building should "involve a welding together of a human community based on universal human values".[32]

Edward Ploman, reviewing communications policy for national development, summarized the dangers and disadvantages of such narrow government control on mass media in the following manner :

> ...mass media represent significant concentration of power and require checks and balances; participation and access can engender public involvement and help citizens to overcome the subject/object split inherent in mass media communication. Participation in production helps to demystify electronic journalism and to make citizens more critical and conscious users of mass communication. Finally, any established media organization can reflect only a certain range of social views. In a democratic society there are always communication needs of which the organization is unaware. Opportunities must be provided for society to hear the messages of emerging groups, in the language of those groups.[33]

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